



## Blackwater As an Ecclesiological Problem

*Through the church, the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*

Ephesians 3:10

Central to my understanding of church, as taught to me by my pastors, is that we are a sanctified people, that is, set apart from the world so that *through the church* the world might know him. We are declared “salt and light” in a dark and decaying world as the new Israel, blessed to be a blessing for the sake of the nations. Blessing implies a way of life not possible by any other means. Therefore, the church, when living faithfully, embodies something tangibly different than that of the watching world. She exists as a mysterious, incomprehensible, and compelling presence. Therefore, the emergence of a huge and unwieldy privatized paramilitary from deep within the church’s evangelical substratum importunes a moment for pause.

Anyone reading the papers over the past six months has engaged, at some level, the troubling questions raised by Blackwater, one of a growing breed of corporations increasingly entrusted with our government’s military and intelligence functions. Its recklessly lethal behavior in Iraq, the recruiting of foreign mercenaries (including Pinochet-era Chilean ex-commandos), the exorbitant cost to U.S. taxpayers, a swelling black weapons market, compromised mission objectives (not to mention troop safety), and the serious lack of accountability is old news, albeit unresolved and no less alarming. Imagine the existence of corporations boasting an army of

covert operatives complete with helicopter gunships, armored vehicles, advanced surveillance technologies, 5,000-acre private bases, and a battery of high-powered lawyers to ensure legal impunity. *Imagine?* We no longer have to.

However, the Blackwater story has only minimally engaged, for better or worse, the American imagination. A recent Rasmussen survey revealed that less than a fifth of the populace has followed this story very closely, and about half lacks an opinion. While this may dismay folks like me, it really shouldn’t surprise us. Setting aside the reflection-challenged nature of our society, the fact of the matter is that the Blackwater phenomenon is, quite literally, business-as-usual... *very* big business, in fact. Since 2001, Blackwater has received over a billion dollars in federal contracts, charging over \$1,200 per day for the services of each employee, which represents six times the cost of an equivalent U.S. soldier (now increasingly tempted to cross over to the private sector). Blackwater is joined by Triple Canopy, DynCorp, Titan, CACI, and scores of other security firms cashing in on one of today’s highest growth industries.

Thus, the specter of flack-jacketed, M16-wielding civilians amassed at a guerrilla warfare training complex in a neighborhood near you may seem novel, if not frightening, but it merely represents the logical extension of our nation’s devotion to free-market capitalism (privatization of the public-sector in particular), and the use of force to preserve it. Acorns, even ones with peculiar shapes and sharp edges, do not roll far from the tree. The rise of for-profit armies is as American as, well, apple pie.

Profiting from war through violent means likely generates a sour taste for most observers, but what does the watching world think when *Christians* are behind such entrepreneurial endeavors? Blackwater’s intimate family ties to some of the most high-profile evangelicals in

America are no secret. Publicly known is the generous, philanthropic distribution of its family wealth among several esteemed Christian colleges and academic institutions, religious-based policy think tanks, and nationally-known parachurch ministries. Intriguingly, a number of these entities are associated with prominent leaders that helped bolster evangelical support for the Iraq war. Connect the dots.

While I am concerned about our tendency towards head-in-the-sand ignorance of such current events, I ultimately seek to suggest that this unchallenged triangulation of evangelicalism, capitalism, and war reveals a crisis of ecclesiology in the American church today. Our lack of an adequate theology of church leaves a vacuum into which the prevailing belief systems and ideologies, whether that of market, democratic ideals, or redemptive violence, take residence. The church, unclear of its calling, identity, or sense of purpose, finds itself vulnerable and drawn to the loudest voice it hears, championing national agendas that fall woefully short of the gospel...and with deadly consequences. Gone is a sense of mission, one that Christ abundantly offers us, that transcends political and national boundaries. Lacking is a witness made supernaturally distinct by the power of the Holy Spirit that renders obsolete the world’s tools of coercion, fearmongering, and lethal technology.

Better ecclesiology must, of course, be accompanied by willful obedience. We must pastor our congregations with integrity, and be willing to speak truth to the larger church. For unless we are seeking to understand, incarnate, and instruct what it means to be the church as Christ intends, we must confess our part in all of its most egregious and regrettable manifestations. ■

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